



Hutton, R. (2016). Witches, pagans and historians: an extended review of Max Dashu, *Witches and Pagans: Women in European Folk Religion, 700-1000*. *The Pomegranate*, 18(2), 205-234.
<https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.v18i2.32246>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1558/pome.v18i2.32246](https://doi.org/10.1558/pome.v18i2.32246)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

Witches, Pagans and Historians. An Extended Review of Max Dashu, *Witches and Pagans: Women in European Folk Religion, 700-1000* (Richmond CA: Veleda Press, 2016), iv + 388 pp. \$24.99 plus shipping (paper).

In 2011 I published an essay in this journal in which I identified a movement of 'counter-revisionism' among contemporary Pagans and some branches of feminist spirituality which overlapped with Paganism.¹ This is characterized by a desire to restore as much credibility as possible to the account of the history of European religion which had been dominant among Pagans and Goddess-centred feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, and much of the 1980s. As such, it was a reaction against a wide-ranging revision of that account, largely inspired by and allied to developments among professional historians, which had proved influential during the 1990s and 2000s. In making that characterization I noted that counter-revisionist authors had as yet published their views mainly upon the internet and in booklets, and largely confined themselves to attempts to discredit revisionists by catching them out in errors of detail or interpretation, rather than attempting to write an alternative history of their own. Max Dashu's book represents an attempt to provide such a history, or rather to commence the systematic provision of one as it is announced to be the first of a series of sixteen volumes of a 'Secret History of the Witches' that should offer a comprehensive coverage of the whole span of recorded European time. This first book is a substantial work, well-footnoted and closely focused upon issues of paganism, magic and gender within a relatively narrow span of years, the early medieval period. It acknowledges that its views are in many cases contrary to those now adopted by the majority of academic experts, and when it does engage with specific authors it does so courteously. These qualities make it a landmark in counter-revisionist writing in Pagan and Goddess-centred spirituality, and as such a good subject for an extended review by an academic historian, especially one strongly identified with the revisionist tendency among Pagans (though I am nowhere myself an explicit target in this book). Such an exercise may also introduce or clarify the current issues relating to the study of paganism and magic in early medieval Europe, for readers of the *Pomegranate*.²

I shall confess at the start that this was a difficult book to review, largely because of the way in which it is structured. It does not commence by setting up the questions to be considered, systematically reviewing the existing publications on its subject, and then building a sequential argument, chapter by chapter. Instead it plunges directly into its material and often veers suddenly and unpredictably between several topics even within the same chapter. Data is piled up from medieval texts, modern folklore, ethnographic parallels and linguistic comparisons, sometimes covering all those within two pages. It does have an overall argument, based on a powerful informing ideology, but evaluating that

¹ "Revisionism and Counter-Revisionism in Pagan History", *The Pomegranate*, 13, no. 2 (2011), 225-56.

² This is also, incidentally, the first time that I have ever published any comment on Max Dashu's work, despite her long track record as a poster of views on the Internet. Some confusion was created several years ago, when an American web site allegedly provided what was supposed to be an interview with me in which I made such comment. I never, however, granted an interview to that site, and would never have done so with the words apparently credited to me. As the site concerned was defunct by the time that I heard the story, I was not even able to read what I was supposed to have said.

from so many disparate pieces of evidence is very hard. Such an evaluation is probably best attempted chapter by chapter, in sequence, and that is the way in which this review will proceed.³

Weavers and Witches

The book opens with a consideration of goddesses of fate in ancient Europe, with folkloric and anthropological comparisons from as far as north-eastern Siberia. It provides good evidence of a very widespread idea that fate was personified as a female deity, or trio of them, who were associated with weaving. I have concerns about some of the detail, such as whether the Anglo-Saxon concept of Wyrð can confidently be regarded as represented by a goddess, but they are not important. What is less easily disregarded is the major problem, for early medievalists, of the possible influence of classical Roman and Greek models on northern Europeans. Max Dashu recognises it, and argues that northern concepts of fate differed in detail from those of the Mediterranean, and so were therefore independent. This does not really get round the problem that northerners may have been adopting a southern model and adding traits from native culture to it; but it is hard to see how anybody could. My only significant problem with the chapter is that the assumption is subsequently made in the book that the chapter has proved that any female diviners in medieval Europe must have been devotees of 'the Fate Goddess', and that is rather a large leap to make. In addition the chapter has a sudden coda which argues that the manner in which early medieval monks sometimes personified the earth as a mother goddess proves a profound and enduring veneration of such a being among the common people. I have previously suggested in this journal that although the ancient Greeks and Romans were capable of conceiving of such a deity, there is relatively little evidence of an actual cult of her, perhaps because people needed more specific and functional deities for their regular concerns. The reason why she endured as a figure in early medieval Christian literature and art may well have been precisely because she did not have a significant cult to be rooted out and so could be allegorized more easily. However, her continued presence in that role does testify to a continuing yearning for the divine feminine among medieval Christians which manifested in an enduring affection for the planetary deity Venus, Mother Nature and a female World Soul, as well as in the better-known cults of the Virgin Mary and many female saints.⁴

The second chapter opens with a useful discussion of the motif of weaving in association with goddesses and female magic, which is a natural linkage as that was the main activity associated with female work in ancient Europe. The speculative part of it is the assumption that the use of prayers and charms attributed to early medieval women engaged in it must have been directed to pagan female deities. Most of the chapter, however, is concerned with the meaning of the Anglo-Saxon terms for witchcraft and witches, which are the root of these modern equivalents: *wiccecræft* and *wiccen* (female) or *wiccan* (male). Dashu notes, correctly, that most scholars, both historians and anthropologists, now define a witch as somebody who practises harmful magic, and then

³ My conventions of British courtesy make me hunger to refer to the author as 'Ms Dashu' instead of always using her last name untitled; but that is not the house style of the *Pomegranate*, and in American culture might be taken as patronizing.

⁴ Hutton, 'Revisionism and Counter-Revisionism', 241-5.

demonstrates, also correctly, that the Anglo-Saxon higher clergy who denounced magic used these words to refer to all forms of it, including beneficial kinds, and all varieties of magician, including (and in fact especially) healers. She therefore accuses modern scholars of unconsciously agreeing with the medieval clergy who attempted to diabolise all magic. If the sources support her argument, what could possibly be problematic about it? The answer is four different things.

The first is that whereas she treats all early medieval churchmen as being of the same (repellent) kind, those whom she quotes in this context, such as Aelfric of Eynsham and Wulfstan II of York, were very unusual. They were exceptionally pious, puritanical and intolerant reformers, bent on campaigns to evangelize their societies to make them conform more closely to the highest Christian ideals, as set forth in the Bible, the Church Fathers and the measures of previous reforming assemblies and evangelical prelates. The second problem is that the Roman Church which functioned as the main source of their inspiration had already carried out a significant semantic trick, to reuse the word *maleficium*, which had been the standard Latin term for harmful magic, to cover all forms of magic, including those formerly regarded as mostly beneficial such as divination.⁵ The suspicion is that they were doing the same with *wiccecraft*. The third is that when we first have good evidence of the way in which ordinary English people thought and spoke about these matters, which is not until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a particular pattern shows up. This is, that members of the well-educated, Protestant, social elite used the terms 'witchcraft' and 'witch' to mean any kind of magic or magician, as part of a condemnation of all magic. These writers also tended to announce that everybody else did the same: Max Dashu quotes one of the most famous, Reginald Scot, in support of her case. At the same time authors such as George Gifford and Edward Poeton, who were concerned with the views of the common people who made up at least eighty per cent of the population, were absolutely plain that these thought that a 'witch' was somebody who tried to harm others by magic, and was hateful, while those who offered magical help to clients, usually termed 'wise' or 'cunning' folk, were admirable and valuable and the natural foes of witches, whom these good magicians combated and identified.⁶ This is confirmed by stage plays concerned with contemporary society, such as Robert Greene's Orlando Furioso, The Fair Maid of the Inn, by John Fletcher and others, Ben Jonson's The Alchemist, John Lyly's Mother Bombie, Thomas Dekker and John Webster's West-ward Hoe, and Thomas Heywood's The Wise Woman of Hogsdon, which explore this semantic distinction. It is further proven by cases of slander in court records, in which the terms 'witch' and 'witchcraft' are always treated as representing deadly abuse, and never qualified in practice by epithets like 'white' or 'good'.⁷ When genteel evangelical Protestants announced that everybody used the word 'witch' for magicians who provided useful services, they meant everybody who mattered: people like themselves.

The reservation of the terms 'witch' and 'witchcraft' for harmful magic remained the rule among most of the English until the twentieth century; which is the simple reason why most English-speaking scholars still employ them in that way now.

⁵ See especially the *Theodosian Code*, 9.16.4.

⁶ George Gifford, *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraftes* (London, 1593); Edward Poeton, *The Winnowing of White Witchcraft*, in British Library Sloane MS1954.

⁷ I have especially used those of York diocese, held in the Borthwick Institute, and of Canterbury diocese, held in the Canterbury Cathedral Library.

There seems no reason why the ordinary people of England, en masse, should have changed their attitudes to them fundamentally during the later Middle Ages, and so it is a reasonable supposition that the Anglo-Saxon ancestors of the words had the same connotation. Such a supposition is supported by the fourth factor mentioned above: that the terms *wiccecraft* and *wiccan* were those most commonly used for magic in the criminal law codes of the early English.⁸ The Anglo-Saxons had more than thirty terms for magical practices and practitioners, and the meanings of a few can be recovered, if vaguely, by association with other words which include their components. *Wicce* or *wicca*, however, is not one of these, and indeed Max Dashu conducts a very good discussion of the theories that have been suggested for its linguistic roots and so its essential connotations, none of which are conclusive. We rely therefore on context for any indication of meaning, and here the recurrence of forms of it (and its related 'craft') in the criminal laws must signify something, especially as few of the other words concerning magic do occur there. Its associations in them are also important. It tends to be grouped together with prostitution or serial adultery, as Dashu emphasizes in an attempt to suggest that the witch and whore were common enemies of patriarchal societies attempting to control women. Other offences as commonly listed with it, however, are perjury, poisoning and 'secret killing', that is murder by stealth rather than homicide committed in a fair fight. All these are cowardly acts directed against the person, which strongly suggests that *wiccecraft* was the usual Anglo-Saxon word which meant or comprised harmful magic.

A strong case can be made, therefore, that it is Dashu who has been deceived by the diabolist clergy of early Christian England, by adopting their tactic (originally employed as a smear) of applying a term generally used for disreputable magic and magicians to all varieties of both. It is not, however, a conclusive one, and it may be that we shall never know with certainty what *wicca*, *wicce* and their derivatives precisely meant. The historian in me mourns this, but the liberal does not. At the present day the word 'witch' has become employed in four different ways: as a worker of harmful magic; as a worker of any kind of magic; as the practitioner of a present-day Pagan religion; and as a feminist icon of power and victimhood. The last two of those are distinctively modern applications, rooted in nineteenth-century ideas, while the first two are both over a millennium old, but all are now legitimized by time and wide usage. It is certain that by 1500 the first of them was the one used by most of the English, and probable that it was the original meaning, but nobody should be in a moral position to inform anybody else that they are wrong in adopting any one of them as a personal preference.

Dashu makes another accusation against professional historians in this second chapter: that they deny that early medieval magic can be called 'pagan' even though churchmen plainly termed it so at the time. Two replies can be made to this charge. The first is that, once again, she is quoting no ordinary churchmen, but Aelfric and Wulfstan and their kind, who accused anybody who practised any kind of Christianity which did not conform to their uniquely narrow and rigorous definition of the religion, of being pagan. The implications of this will be explored

⁸ Listed in Benjamin Thorpe (ed.), *The Ancient Laws and Institutes of England* (London, 1840), esp. 316, 378; and F. L. Atteborough (ed.), *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (New York, 1963), esp. 63, 109, 121.

further below. The second is that, starting with its takeover of the Roman Empire, Christianity had sought to obtain complete control of all human attempts to contact and work with the divine, the supernatural and the preternatural. That meant that it extended the Latin term 'magic' (*magia*), used in pagan Roman culture to condemn private, selfish and often anti-social attempts by humans to tap into superhuman power, to any attempt to do that without using the personnel of the established Church or its prayers or scriptures. All such acts were now stigmatized by orthodox and elite clergy as pagan, and so linked to, or easy prey for, demons.⁹ The question of whether the people resorting to magical remedies and mechanisms thought of themselves as pagan was of no interest to the clerics concerned, whom Dashu simply takes at their word, believing thereby that she has resolved the whole matter.

Her chapter is not, fortunately, wholly concerned with polemical arguments. Just as it commenced with a useful discussion, of the symbolism of weaving, so it veers off at the end into another, a survey of early medieval binding spells.

Wise Women and Demonesses

The main strength of the third chapter lies in the Europe-wide survey that it makes of local terms for magic and magicians, and its examples of medieval and early modern folk magic, which will be a gift to anybody hitherto unacquainted with these subjects. Once more, however, there are problems at times with the way in which the evidence is handled. To pursue her campaign against the use of the word 'witch' in any negative sense, Dashu emphasises that the oldest names for witches in European languages highlight their positive, spiritual, gifts; but as what she is doing is to translate a wide range of different Continental terms for a good magician, with the English word 'witch', her argument is a circular one. There are also specific linguistic issues. Here, as elsewhere in the book, she translates the ancient Latin word *saga* simply and confidently as 'wise woman'. This would presumably have come as a shock to the first-century pagan Roman princess Livia Julia, who put up a memorial stone to her beloved little slave boy, whom she believed had been murdered by a *saga*.¹⁰ The word is certainly related to other Latin terms, for cunning and shrewdness, but one of the acts which some *sagae* were presumed to carry out so deftly was that of killing small children. This matters, because when (for example) Dashu later deals with the alleged execution of *sagae* by an eleventh-century Bohemian king, she insists that the use of the term proves that the women concerned were harmless magicians (or at least regarded as such): but it does not.

All of these issues impinge upon a fundamental weakness of the book: that it is reluctant to acknowledge that the ordinary people of ancient and early medieval Europe could have felt anything but love and reverence for women, and especially women magicians, unless brainwashed by elite males, and especially Christians. In this chapter in particular, she fails to face up to two particularly scary female figures commonly recorded in those periods: the *strix* and the *striga*. The *strix* was an owl-like female Roman demon who flew around at night preying

⁹ On this, see Valerie Flint, 'The Demonization of Magic in Late Antiquity', in Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (ed.), *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe. Volume Two* (London, 1999), 277-347; Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), 35-41; Michael D. Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe* (Lanham MD, 2009), 40-50.

¹⁰ Printed in Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft and Ghosts in the Ancient World* (Oxford, 2009), 48.

on small children, whose life force it sapped until the child died and was buried, whereupon the *strix* would eat it. The boundary between it and human witches – who abound in pagan Roman literature in especially murderous, horrific and anti-social forms, always female – was blurred by the fact that these witches were thought to take on its shape for their own nocturnal forays. There is no question of the belief in it being an imposition on the people by misogynist elite males, because the elite male writers who have recorded it for us treated it as a popular superstition which they were themselves inclined to reject. Christianity imbibed this attitude, and its churchmen tried to persuade ordinary folk to cease fearing the *strix*, meeting much resistance in the process.¹¹ Dashu is aware of the figure, but pushes it out of her picture by declaring it to have been ‘once revered as the dreamer’s journey’.¹² She does not explain what this statement means, let alone try to justify it or provide a source reference for it, and it is hard to see how she could have done. In origin and nature, the *strix* clearly derives from a string of winged nocturnal demonesses who kill children, found across the ancient world from the Mesopotamian *lil*-demons to the Hebrew *lilith* and the Greek *lamia*, *gello* and *mormo*. Some of these are recorded for millennia before the *strix* appears in Roman texts, and they all clearly reflect a very real human fear, in traditional human societies which suffered high infant mortality and understood the causes of disease and cot death very little.¹³

The name of the *striga*, or *stria*, was derived directly from the *strix* by the Latin-writing clerks who compiled the law codes of the Germanic kingdoms which were founded out of the ruins of the Western Roman Empire. It referred, however, to a different kind of imagined being: a specifically Germanic belief in evil human beings, mostly female, who went abroad at night to attack people of all ages by sapping their vital essence, or removing their internal organs, in order to feast upon the stolen life force or body parts. The victims would waste away and die. This sort of person is found in the laws of the Frankish king Clovis, the Alamanni, the Lombard King Rothari, and the famous Frankish emperor Charlemagne. The earliest code, that of Clovis, reflects a pagan society in which the *striga* was still credited by all, and prescribes heavy penalties for being one, but the others all outlaw belief in such beings as a pagan delusion, not to be shared by Christians: in this manner the elite Roman rejection of the *strix* was extended to the Germanic *striga*. These codes therefore forbid, as non-Christian, the former practice of killing people suspected of being *strigae*.¹⁴ The prohibition by

¹¹ All the most important primary texts for this figure were printed in Samuel Grant Oliphant, ‘The Story of the Strix’, *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 44 (1913), 133-49, and 45 (1914), 49-63, to which material can be added from Ovid, *Fasti*, 6.131-68 and Sextus Pompeius Festus in *Patrologiae Latina*, vol., 95, col. 1668. Discussions of it can be found in Oliphant’s article, and in David Lloyd Leinweber, ‘Witchcraft and Lamiae in *The Golden Ass*’, *Folklore*, 105 (1994), 77-82; Sarah Iles Johnston, *Restless Dead* (Berkeley, 1999), 165-79; and Laura Cherubini, ‘The Virgin, the Bear and the Upside-Down Strix’, *Arethusa*, 42 (2009), 77-97.

¹² Dashu, *Witches and Pagans*, 81.

¹³ For a sample of commentaries, see Ralph Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (3rd edn., Detroit, 1990), 221-40; R. Campbell Thompson, *Semitic Magic* (London, 1908), 65-8; Kathrin Trattner, ‘From Lamashtu to Lilith’, *Disputatio Philosophica*, 15 (2014), 109-18; Sarah Iles Johnston, ‘Defining the Dreadful’, in Martin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (ed.), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (Leiden, 1995), 301-7; and Daniel Ogden, *Dragons, Serpents and Slayers in the Classical and Early Christian Worlds* (Oxford, 2013), 68-107.

¹⁴ These codes are edited in the successive volumes of the *Monumenta Germaniae historica*.

Charlemagne is especially celebrated, and ringing: 'if anyone, deceived by the Devil, believes, as is customary among pagans, that any man or woman is a *striga*, and eats men, and on that account burn that person to death, or eat his or her flesh, he shall be executed'.¹⁵

This is too prominent a text for Dashu to ignore, and she tries to sideline it by suggesting that it was a rare case of northern pagans putting people to death for magical work, being confined to the Saxons whom Charlemagne was addressing; whereas any sympathy for Charlemagne must be offset by the savage penalties that he simultaneously introduced for paganism amongst them. In fact Charlemagne knew what he was talking about, as belief in the *striga* was a widespread trait of Germanic paganism, as is attested in the law codes cited which span Western Europe over a period of three centuries. Those laws tell us more about the belief: that women especially were suspected of being *strigae*; that the accusation of being one was an insult especially deployed between them, and taken very seriously; and that *strigae* were thought to gather for their cannibal feasts. Dashu has run into Rothari's law on the issue, and again tried to push it aside, by declaring that his prohibition, against anybody who killed anybody else's female servant or slave on suspicion of being a *striga*, meant that 'lords' were left free to kill their own women on the same suspicion. The version that she read clearly did not contain the whole text, which goes on to say that Christians should not believe that any woman 'can eat up a living human being from the inside', and so nobody should kill one for that belief at all.¹⁶ Lombards apparently did not tend to suspect their own servants of being cannibal witches, but those of rivals and opponents.¹⁷

We have therefore good evidence of two major ancient traditions, held by pagans across the Roman and Germanic worlds, of people, mostly expected to be women, who carried out magical attacks on fellow humans at night, resulting in an often lingering death for their victims. South of the Alps, this belief was not shared by rulers, and so did not result in officially sanctioned retribution, but to the north it certainly was and did, resulting in an unknown, but given the broad geography involved, probably cumulatively large, number of executions or casual homicides. The belief was carried south into the Mediterranean lands by the Germanic invaders, only to be outlawed by a Roman-influenced Christianity, which held that it was a delusion which resulted in needless loss of life. In this important sense, Christians did not institute witch-hunting when they converted the Germans, but did their utmost to stop it. They may have substituted savage laws against paganism in some states, such as Charlemagne's, but these laws do not seem to have claimed lives after the initial imposition of the new religion. That the pagan Romans and Germans should have believed in such nocturnal horrors is not surprising, as tribal peoples all over the world have often associated evil magicians with owls, and feared that such magicians afflicted

¹⁵ *Monumenta Germaniae historica. Section Two. Volume One* (Hanover, 1973), 68-9.

¹⁶ One of the difficulties of the book is that in most of it Dashu rarely has access to complete primary sources, and so has to use them as filtered through secondary texts and selective editions, of greatly varying quality.

¹⁷ Edited in *Monumenta Germaniae historica. Leges. Section One. Volume Four* (Witzenhausen, 1962), 53, 91.

innocent neighbours with fatal illnesses which enabled them to feast on their victims after death.¹⁸

That was, however, medieval Christianity's very problem: that such beliefs were too deeply embedded in the population to be easily removed. The cannibal women of Germanic folklore are still recorded as present in popular tradition, by unhappy churchmen, throughout the central Middle Ages when belief in them was still defined as illusory.¹⁹ Eventually, mainstream Western Christianity buckled before public opinion, and when in the fifteenth century it adopted the novel idea of a conspiracy of devil-worshipping witches, intended to destroy both Christianity and decent human beings, the two fearsome ancient figures were embedded in the new concept. The first trials that were provoked by that idea, in the Alps, Pyrenees and Italy during the 1420s, were of people accused of going abroad at night to murder children with magic.²⁰ The Spanish word for the *strix*, *bruja*, changed meaning in the fifteenth century to become the standard one for a human witch, while sixteenth-century Italian demonologists used *strix* itself for the same sort of person.²¹ North of the Alpine watershed, the German-speaking area of Europe which contained the concept of the night-roaming cannibal witch became the heartland of early modern witch trials, in which more than half their victims perished. In recent decades professional studies of the early modern witch trials have emphasized the importance of a push from below, a desire for prosecution on the part of the common people, as a vital factor in generating those trials. Without a recognition of the part that ancient fears played in producing that desire, and in forming attitudes to witchcraft among many Europeans ever since, no real understanding of the role of witch beliefs in European culture can be achieved.

Volva, Cailleach and Holda

The next two chapters of the book, the fourth and fifth, deal with portraits of pagan female visionaries and magicians in Old Norse literature, and in my opinion generally do so very well. They cover all the main representations of such figures, and also tackle the main archaeological evidence for actual female magicians, represented by the graves of women accompanied by unusual equipment, such as possible staves. They add interesting discussions of the symbolism of the distaff in wider medieval culture, and of medieval divinatory practices, magical rites for the dead and concepts of the soul, again relying mainly on the Scandinavian textual evidence. Throughout, the female role in magic, as displayed in those texts, is pushed to its maximum possible extent, and the archaeological data is likewise stretched to identify female graves as those of

¹⁸ For the connection with nocturnal birds, see Alex Scobie, 'Strigiform Witches in Roman and Other Cultures', *Fabula*, 19 (1978), 74-101. For cannibal witches in extra-European cultures, see the first chapter of my own latest book, *The Witch*, forthcoming from Yale University Press.

¹⁹ For a handy summary of such references, see Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons* (2nd edition, London, 1993), 164-6.

²⁰ The records are now edited in Domenico Mammoli, *The Record of the Trial and Execution of a Witch* (Rome, 1972); Peter Maxwell-Stuart, *The Occult in Medieval Europe* (London, 2005), 158-60; and Martine Ostorero et al., *L'imaginaire du sabbat* (Lausanne, 1999).

²¹ Pau Castell Granados, 'Wine Vate Witches Suffocate Children', *EHumanista*, 26 (2014), 170-95; Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Strix* (Milan, 1523: the most accessible edition is the Strasbourg one of 1642).

magicians. None the less, though speculative, such treatment of the sources is legitimate.

Occasionally some of the shaky polemical claims of earlier chapters are repeated – it is still assumed that when reforming evangelical churchmen state that a practice that they dislike is pagan, this proves that there were real pagans surviving to practice it – and the stretching of evidence seems to go a little too far. Dashu recognises that in the Norse literature female magicians were held responsible for working harm as well as good (as indeed were magicians in general), but regards this as a demonization of their former completely respected role: that such a former role existed is an article of faith in the book. There is no realization that a fear of destructive magic is a feature of most traditional human societies, worldwide, including some (such as many in New Guinea) who when first contacted by Europeans had a Neolithic lifestyle. A Burgundian law punishing ‘women who violate graves’ is interpreted in the fifth chapter as being aimed at pagan priestesses who carried out time-honoured ceremonies for the dead. It is more likely that the ruling was simply aimed at magicians who were thought to take body parts from corpses for use in their rites. There is an Irish law of roughly the same period which forbids exactly this, and in the later Roman Empire (to which the Burgundian kings saw themselves as heirs) the practice was so firmly believed to be carried on that during periods of persecution of magicians, anybody seen near a tomb after dark was likely to be arrested.²²

It needs to be stressed, however, that these moments of stretched evidence are occasional in these chapters, and the one major feature of them which is likely to cause most experts unease is the assumption, which runs throughout them, that the richness of the portrayal of a former pagan world in the Norse literature is due straightforwardly to an accurate survival of memories of that world in oral tradition. Such an assumption was common in scholarly works until the late twentieth century, when such works began increasingly to express concern about the fact that the texts in which those images of Norse paganism feature were all composed in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, or later, long after the conversion of Scandinavian societies to Christianity. Some of the material in them, especially the poetry, could be older, but nobody is certain of how much older, and equally nobody can be sure of how much the pictures of paganism in them, including all those of female magicians, were the products of the imagination of later Christian writers. Neil Price, in a book which Dashu has read, attempted to restate a case for accepting that they preserved accurate memories of real practices, but his argument has proved controversial. Most specialists at the present time seem to accept that the texts concerned are a good representation of the way in which Christian authors writing in Old Norse in the central Middle Ages liked to imagine the pre-Christian past – and it is significant that they chose to imagine it in distinctive ways - but that it is impossible to say with any confidence how far their imagination was accurate.²³

This problem persists into the next chapter, in which Dashu gives the same treatment to the also famously rich portrayals of a long-past pagan ancient world

²² Alexander Thom (ed.), *Ancient Laws of Ireland* (Dublin, 1865-1901), vol. 5, 295-7; Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, 19.12.1-18, 28.18-21.

²³ Neil Price's book is *The Viking Way* (Uppsala, 2002). A rejoinder is provided by Clive Tolley, *Shamanism in Norse Myth and Magic* (Helsinki, 2009), 2 vols. Stephen A. Mitchell, *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 2011), is a good representation of the current cautious approach.

in medieval Irish literature. Her lack of consciousness of the problem of doing so is made more striking by the tremendous debate that has raged among experts in that literature during the past three decades. On one side were 'nativists' who continued to adhere to the orthodoxy of the early twentieth century, that the literature embodied accurate memories of the pagan past which had been preserved in oral tradition. On the other were revisionists who have pointed out that it was composed, in its present form, by highly literate Christians, usually educated in the Bible and Church Fathers, and classical Greek and Roman texts, long after the conversion period. They argue that both textual and archaeological evidence suggest that only a small amount of knowledge about ancient Irish paganism got through into the medieval stories, and then often in distorted form. It seems that overall the revisionists are now dominant.²⁴ Dashu's belief in an accurate and unbroken popular memory carrying tradition from ancient to medieval times is, however, rooted in more than an attachment to older scholarship. Another of the articles of faith of her book is that common people represented a reservoir of essential decency, and that their willingness to preserve old (and therefore to her, good) beliefs was an aspect of this. Her particular dislike is for educated and powerful men; and her attribution of medieval Norse and Irish literature to folk memory also releases her from having to give any credit to the Christian scribes who wrote and preserved the texts as we have them.

None the less, this should not stop her from saying interesting things about female characters as they appear in medieval Irish texts, and she does deal with some; but the space in which she might have said more is taken up by a concentration on a figure who has no demonstrable presence in medieval sources at all. This is the Cailleach, who is instead a major character in modern Gaelic Irish, Scottish and Manx folklore, which Dashu recounts at length, as a mighty and venerable superhuman female closely connected to the land. Dashu is uneasily aware of the textual problem, and tries to get rid of it by two tactics. The first is to identify a genuine character in a medieval text, Bui of Beare, as the Cailleach: but they have nothing in common with each other, save that they are associated with the same peninsula. The other is to accuse the authors of the medieval literature of having deliberately suppressed mention of the Cailleach because of antipathy to her; but it is hard to see, in that case, why those authors should have made extensive reference to other divine females who ought to have been even more unpalatable to medieval Christian sensibilities, such as the ferocious Morrigan, Babh and Nemain. The reason why the Cailleach is so important to Dashu as an 'Old Goddess' (in her expression) is that, as a mighty divine female associated in modern tales with natural places and prehistoric monuments, she is the closest figure in Irish tradition to the kind of deity to whom Dashu is herself instinctually attracted: a primordial Great Goddess representing the earth. This attraction is not surprising, because such a being is not only the favourite entity of modern American spiritual feminism, but of the whole modern Western imagination.²⁵ Readers of this book will already have been informed in the first chapter, as an established fact, that Neolithic long barrows and dolmens

²⁴ For summaries of the debate by different onlookers at different stages, see Ronald Hutton, *Blood and Mistletoe* (London, 2009), 30-32; and Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals* (Princeton, 2016), 30-71.

²⁵ On this see my essay, 'The Discovery of the Modern Goddess', in Joanne Pearson et al. (ed.), *Nature Religion Today* (Edinburgh, 1998), 89-100.

were representations of the womb of the Earth Mother: an idea which is certainly possible, but only as one of many possible interpretations.

Actually, in her determination to make the Cailleach into an ancient and enduring goddess, Dashu has missed a different, and even more exciting and radical, possibility. If this figure indeed developed in the Gaelic imagination in the post-medieval period, which is what the actual evidence suggests, then ordinary people were capable of continuing to conceive of, and spread wide interest in, new superhuman beings throughout the Christian period. Moreover, such beings needed to have no connections with elite culture, let alone Christianity, and could represent another aspect of an enduring hunger for divine females within Christian societies, this time at a popular level. At any rate, halfway through the chapter Dashu suddenly leaves Ireland for a return to Norse literature and a good consideration of superhuman females in it, followed by an equally enjoyable closing section which compares the figure of the divine hag in a range of literatures and folklores from Ireland to Finland.

The seventh chapter deals with the medieval tradition of night rides of spirits, usually female and usually with a female leader, which fortunate human beings, again mostly women and probably mostly magicians offering services to clients, were thought to be able to join. These have featured prominently in the work of Pagan counter-revisionists as evidence of continuing pagan beliefs and practices, largely because of the emphasis that they were given in a famous book by Carlo Ginzburg, where they were put under the enticing chapter heading of 'Following the Goddess': a literal caption as churchmen long identified the leader of the rides with the pagan goddess Diana.²⁶ Dashu is not content to rely on Ginzburg, however, but makes a praiseworthy attempt to discover all the texts which relate to the tradition in her early period, which consist, almost inevitably, of denunciations of it by churchmen.²⁷ Unsurprisingly, she identifies its leader as a pagan witch-goddess followed by magic-working women. Like Ginzburg, and wisely, she is inclined to regard the identification with Diana as a probable imposition on the tradition by classically trained clerics. Like Ginzburg, also, she is more willing to credit the other name given to the leading female spirit in early texts, Herodias, as derived from an actual deity: she proposes that the name is a corruption of a German deity of earth originally called Erada, Erde, Hretha or something similar. Her favourite contender for the role is however, a Germanic deity called Holda or Holle, whose name was linked to the rides from a relatively early period. In suggesting this she is following a scholarly tradition started by Jacob Grimm, whose work she uses, in 1835; and she also follows this in crediting another medieval name for the leader of the nocturnal retinue, Perchta or Berchta, as belonging to a second northern goddess.

Most of this is perfectly in order, and much of it may be correct, though once more she presses things past a point at which the actual texts support her.²⁸ The medieval churchmen on whose work we rely for information knew perfectly well

²⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies* (London edition of 1992), 89-121.

²⁷ Praiseworthy, but sometimes confused. For example, the earliest text to mention these rides survives as a copy in a collection made c. 900 of a lost original probably some decades older. Not realizing that the nature of the original is conjectural, Dashu demands to know why historians who refer to it do not produce it.

²⁸ What follows is based on the fifth chapter of my book with Yale University Press, *The Witch*, which is devoted to this topic.

what pagans and heretics looked like, and did not think that the women who claimed to join the rides were either (and nor, for the record, did Ginzburg think these women to be pagans). Instead they regarded them as Christians who happened to have silly fantasies or dreams about roving at night, produced by demons messing with their minds: which is why the making of these claims was never criminalized before 1350 and why the ecclesiastics who denounced them prescribed relatively mild penances for them. When the women concerned start at last to speak for themselves, in court records from the late fourteenth and the fifteenth century, their testimony supports this view. None seem to have engaged in physical acts of assembly or worship, but all seem to have believed that they joined the Lady and her followers in trance or dream. Nor do they appear to have regarded the experience of accompanying those beings as representing allegiance to a rival religion, until later the night-rides got swept up into the stereotype of the satanic witch which inspired witch hunts from the fifteenth century onward and those who thought that they had joined the rides were forced to confess to apostasy, and then executed. Perhaps the closest we can get to the way in which those who claimed to go on the rides assimilated them to a cosmology is the declaration of a woman at Milan in 1390; that her Lady ruled over her followers even as Christ did over the world.²⁹ This fits the pattern commented upon earlier in this review, of people in Christian societies interposing lesser divinities, with a more direct responsibility for earthly affairs, and often female, between humanity and the Christian Trinity.³⁰

There is also no straightforward correspondence between what we know of ancient goddesses and the leader of the nocturnal spirit rides. Diana would be a good match, as a goddess of the moon, the night, wild nature and witchcraft, but had no demonstrable widespread popular cult north of the Alps where the references to the rides appear. Medieval people themselves thought that the Herodias of the rides was the character of that name from the Bible, because by the twelfth century the two were directly linked. Dashu's attempts to derive her from a Germanic earth goddess are based either on Germanic words for the earth or apparent Germanic goddesses with similar names but no known attributes. In fact there is a simple reason for viewing Diana and Herodias as a natural pairing, originally derived from the imagination of churchmen, and that is that they are respectively the only pagan goddess named in the New Testament and the wickedest woman portrayed in it. Both certainly became characters in popular culture in the course of the Middle Ages and remained so. Dashu finds it hard to believe that medieval people could have known Bible stories when most could not read, but she discounts the role of preaching, the major vehicle for propagation of the Christian faith for its first eighteen hundred years and one which could make a considerable impact on an illiterate society.

As for known pagan goddesses, there are none which were definitely associated with leading a cavalcade of followers, human or spirit, at night. Carlo Ginzburg was aware that no classical Greek or Roman text portrays one, and instead favoured deities from the Rhineland, the epicentre of early references to the rides, such as the horse goddess Epona or the three bountiful Matres: but the

²⁹ The records of this famous case are printed in Wolfgang Behringer, *Shaman of Oberstdorf* (Charlottesville VA, 1998), 54-5, 173-4.

³⁰ As well as in 'Revisionism and Counter-Revisionism', I have dealt with this theme myself in *The Triumph of the Moon* (Oxford, 1999), 32-51; *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London, 2003), 137-92; and *Pagan Britain* (London, 2013) 391-96.

abundant iconography of these makes no reference to a retinue. It is possible that a pagan German goddess, from outside the bounds of the Roman Empire, and so of material or written evidence, inspired the tradition, but in medieval times that became weaker in Germany the further from the old Roman frontier one went. Percht or Berchta can probably be ruled out, as she does not appear before the late Middle Ages, and it has plausibly been suggested that her name was derived from one for the Christian feast of the Epiphany when she was reputed to be most active, and personified.³¹ Dashu's favourite candidate, Holda, remains the best bet, but she is still not attested in the Roman areas of Germany, and in the earliest reference which seems to link her name to the rides, in Burchard of Worms, it is the retinue itself which is called a holda in all but one version of the text (which does not work grammatically). The name Holda features in an older source, but that is a praise-poem by a monk (Walafrid Strabo) for an empress, and in that context almost certainly refers to a godly Old Testament prophetess, known in the Latin translation of the Hebrew Bible as Olda: so the two, the prophetess and the roving retinue, may have become combined because of the similarity of names. When actual women who claimed to join the rides appear in the records, in the late Middle Ages, they never refer to the figure whom they follow as Diana, Herodias or Holda. They always give her a local name associated with foresight, abundance or generosity, or simply call her 'the Lady' or where the rides have no identified leader, speak of 'the ladies'.

It seems therefore that even if an ancient goddess or goddesses lay behind the leader of the night journeys, the concept of those journeys developed in the course of the medieval period, and this suggestion is matched by the geography of the belief. No early medieval source records it in the Mediterranean world, even though there were plenty of churchmen and church councils denouncing popular beliefs and customs in that region at that time.³² Instead, between the ninth and eleventh centuries, it is talked about only in the Frankish world, specifically in texts produced in its heart, along the Rhine. By the thirteenth century it was talked about across most of Western Europe, including Italy, but during the later Middle Ages it contracted, vanishing from England and France and breaking into three regional traditions: in the southern half of Germany, where the night journeys had a leader but were not joined by humans; in much of the Alps, where they were joined by humans but had no apparent leader; and in Italy, where they both had a leader and were joined by humans. All survived into modern folklore. We therefore seem to have here a vibrant popular belief which appears four hundred years after the area in which it is first located was converted to Christianity, then slowly spreads across a much larger range, and finally retreats into lasting regional strongholds, all along having very little reference to or connection with the dominant religion, or opposition to it. In religious terms, the Middle Ages are starting to look like a much more untidy and exciting place than we had formerly thought, and one to which the polarized labels of Christian and pagan hardly do justice.

Persecution

³¹ John B. Smith, 'Perchta the Belly-Slitter and Her Kin' *Folklore*, 115 (2004), 167-86.

³² Some confusion may be caused by the fact that Ratherius, bishop of the Italian city of Verona, mentions them in the tenth century: but Ratherius was a Frank who spent most of his career north of the Alps.

The eighth chapter of Max Dashu's book concerns prosecutions and lynchings of women accused of magic in northern Europe during her chosen period, and she makes a list of most of those in the historical sources. She acknowledges that they are not numerous, but holds that this is because of the lack of surviving records. In the process she accuses current (professional) scholarship of two important mistakes: 'the great historiographical error' of supposing that in this case absence of evidence is evidence of absence, and 'the new myth' that there were few witchcraft persecutions in the Middle Ages. In piling up as many examples of attacks on women magicians as she can, she is actually following in a venerable American tradition, that of nineteenth-century historians such as Andrew Dickson White and Henry Charles Lea, on the latter of whom she draws. These used witch trials as a prime example of the excesses to which religion and superstition could run, building up lists of them to emphasise their numbers, and horror, and extolling modern scientific rationalism as the antidote.³³ There was a strong anti-Catholic undertone to their work, and some of this seems to have rubbed off on Dashu in her constant hostility to Romans and the church associated with them, and tendency to credit northern Europeans with naturally finer feelings. Instead of crying up science, however, she substitutes feminism and paganism as the answer to the evils which she is trying to expose. So why do current historians do not see things her way?

A large part of the reason is that there actually is evidence on which to base a judgement. Certainly there are no judicial records, but churchmen left a lot of books and correspondence, as anybody who has tried to slog through the volumes for the period in *Patrologiae Latina* and *Monumenta Germaniae historica* will have found. There is also quite a good supply of histories, chronicles and saints' lives, and it is hard to imagine that had much more witch-hunting gone on in early medieval Europe than is recorded in all these types of sources, then they would have mentioned it. When criminal court records do begin to survive, from the twelfth century on, they show the same small number of cases concerning magic which is recorded in the earlier Middle Ages. Another telling sign is that throughout the medieval period, in periods of dynastic tension, ruling families used the charge of employing magic to kill, disable or coerce as an accusation in internal feuds: Dashu notes the examples. As soon as major witch-hunting took off, from the later fifteenth century onward, social elites almost completely abandoned the tactic, as suddenly too dangerous. Academics have not denied that there were prosecutions and murders of people accused of using magic in the early and high Middle Ages. Wolfgang Behringer totted up the known cases and emphasised not only that there was a steady trickle of them but that in a few areas they represented more intense witch-hunting than in the early modern period.³⁴ Yet they remain a trickle, a few cases per century, across Europe.

This was mostly because medieval Europe lacked the vital factor which created the large early modern witch hunts: the new belief by religious elites in witchcraft

³³ Andrew Dickson White *A History of the War of Science with Theology in Christendom* (New York, 1897); Henry Charles Lea, *The History of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1888), and *Materials Towards a History of Witchcraft*, ed. by Arthur Howland (New York, 1957).

³⁴ *Witches and Witch-Hunts* (Cambridge, 2004), 51-57.

as a satanic conspiracy to destroy good religion and good people, carried on by evil humans who made a pact with the Devil and worshipped him at assemblies in return for using his lesser demons to kill and ruin their neighbours. Lacking this belief, earlier European Christians thought in terms of two different kinds of magic: that used by people to harm others, and that used by them to help others. Dashu mixes them both together, as the same phenomenon, the persecution of hitherto beloved women magicians, and pads out the result further by bringing in laws against adultery, as further examples of the oppression of women, and paganism, which she regards as the same thing. If witch-hunting is the subject under consideration, however, then the distinction is vital. Almost all the examples we have of prosecutions and attacks upon suspected magicians in the early Middle Ages are for attempting to harm others; and every human society which has believed in magic has possessed sanctions against its use for that purpose. Certainly the Germanic and Slavonic peoples who are Dashu's concern in her book seem to have suspected women of destructive magic more than men, and this probably was because these cultures saw women, both for good and for ill, as the more naturally magical sex: hence the Germanic fear of the *striga*. Churchmen did not spend much time denouncing harmful magicians, because they did not need to do so: virtually everybody agreed that those who malevolently harmed their neighbours should be made to pay for it. Instead, reforming clergy repeatedly condemned those who offered good magic - healers and diviners - on the grounds that this slighted their God, to whom prayer should be directed when in need, according to the orthodox formulations of the Bible and church liturgy: in other words, they wanted all uncanny power to be channelled through their institution. What is so striking about their angry rhetoric is the discrepancy between it and action. Instead of recording with satisfaction widespread and sustained campaigns against people providing magical services, the same churchmen commonly rued the lack of them, and the fact that even royalty and aristocrats habitually resorted to magicians; and this being the case, the chances of such elites enforcing a contrary attitude on the common people were slim. Indeed, in the course of the early Middle Ages, clerics increasingly began to make compromises with the magic that Church Fathers had condemned wholesale. Valerie Flint has written a much-admired book about all this.³⁵

Max Dashu is aware that in the cases which do survive from the period it was, usually, secular rulers and not churchmen – contrary, as she notes, to modern popular belief – who led persecution of magicians. She attributes this, as another statement of faith delivered without evidence, to a desire by those rulers to oppress women and peasants: as usual she cannot imagine that ordinary people could feel any animosity towards individuals whom they believed had caused them harm. In this context, churchmen sometimes played an important part in discouraging such people from seeking revenge. As said, as part of Christianization the killing of women as suspected *striges* was forbidden across the Germanic world, and clergy long described the night-rides with the Lady as delusions instead of making them evidence for heresy. Furthermore, early medieval clerics sometimes condemned attacks on people for alleged bad magic as a means by which people punished by the Christian God for their sins attempted to evade responsibility for their woes by blaming others. In the 810s

³⁵ *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, 1993).

Bishop Agobard of Lyons denounced the murder by mobs of people suspected of magically causing storms and epidemics.³⁶ At Freising in Bavaria, in 1090, three women were burned to death by their peasant neighbours who were convinced that their victims had used magic to destroy human lives and crops. These murders could only happen because the local bishop, who would have prevented them, had died and no successor was yet appointed. Monks from a neighbouring religious house buried the burned remains in their own cemetery and honoured the dead women as martyrs.³⁷ Ten years before, the Pope himself, Gregory VII, had ordered the king of Denmark to stop his subjects murdering women who were likewise blamed for bad weather and disease.³⁸ Dashu knows about this last case, but tries to avoid giving a Christian leader any credit for decency by asserting that there is no evidence that his letter had any effect. There is equally none that it did not; and a reasonable guide to the effectiveness of churchmen's decrees is whether they needed to be repeated. Those against popular magic were, constantly, but the Pope did not write again to Denmark. All these actions must, in total, have done much to damp down witch-hunting in early medieval Europe, and help explain its apparent scarcity. It was when clergy turned to encouraging it instead, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, that things changed horrifically.

At any rate, for her final chapter, Dashu follows a sound instinct and returns yet again to the Old Norse sources, to make an intensive feminist analysis of the famous poem *Voluspá*, while admitting that alternative readings to hers are possible. This is good scholarship, as she has shown before when offering possible viewpoints upon the Nordic literature, and she effectively brings out the violence of the sexual politics in the poem, as in other works of that literature. As usual, the good news is missing – the deeply respectful and realistic portraits of women in the Icelandic family sagas, written in the same language and place, and near the same time – but within its limits of scope this is a perfectly sound chapter.

Conclusions

The book has a short final section in which Dashu characterizes its central achievement as having proved 'many academicians' wrong in their insistence that Europe was fully Christianized by the early medieval period, because its reforming churchmen thought otherwise. She believes that in doing so she has vindicated 'reviled and forbidden heritages'. Her final claim for her book is to give 'people who are not academic specialists' knowledge of the concealed past that she has recovered. So what can this review article now conclude upon it as a whole? One conclusion is that Max Dashu is quite a good scholar of comparative mythology. I find her readings of that embodied in the Norse texts in particular interesting and generally valid, and her feminist perspective on them refreshing, as is her use of folklore and myth from different European cultures to see how motifs and ideas are found across them. Only when her work is considered as history do I have any real difficulties with it, but here the difficulties are clearly

³⁶ *Contra insulam vulgi opinionem de brandine*, most accessibly edited in *Patrologiae Latina*, vol. 104, cols. 147-58.

³⁷ *Monumenta Germaniae historica. Scriptores XIII* (Hanover, 1881), 57.

³⁸ *Monumenta Germaniae historica. Epistolae Selectae. Volume 2.2*, (2nd edition, Berlin, 1955), 498.

significant, for reasons that must be evident by now. In large part they derive from absences, of figures, voices and phenomena which are present in the historical records but not in the book, and of hard evidence to underpin various assertions which derive from dogmatically held beliefs about how the past ought to have been.

Two more such absences should be considered now, to contextualize the whole work. One consists, simply, of good men, except when implicitly present in an amorphous mass of idealized peasantry. The women murdered at Freising appear in the book: the monks who buried them do not. This has a knock-on effect when considering issues such as the status of magic in the period. It may well have been true that women were regarded across much of early medieval northern Europe as inherently the more magical sex, but male magicians still often feature in its records, and expectations: as in periods before and after, it was thought that they could still learn their craft proficiently. As such, they are present (with women) in professional histories of magic in the period such as that by Valerie Flint, but not in Dashu's, and while to some extent that is justified by her overt concentration on women, this concentration sometimes serves to skew the picture. A more serious absence in the work is what recent historians have generally dubbed 'folk Christianity'. Throughout, Dashu tends to portray the relationship between Christians, and pagans or magicians (which she treats as more or less the same thing), as roughly equivalent to that between Nazis and Jews under the Third Reich. This represents her greatest single difference from professional scholarship, because it ignores a huge middle ground in which specialists have increasingly become interested. Back in 1991 I drew a distinction between 'surviving paganism' in the British Middle Ages (of which there seemed to be none) and 'pagan survivals' as aspects of medieval British culture, absorbed into a Christian society (of which there seemed to be many).³⁹ In the years since, the tide of opinion among professional historians has swung further, against even the identification of 'pagan survivals'. In 1992 Eamon Duffy could already argue that what had been called 'pagan' in medieval English culture should simply be termed 'lay Christianity'.⁴⁰ In 1996 Karen Jolly, concerned with Anglo-Saxon charms, among which such survivals had been keenly recognised, concluded that their 'so-called magic or pagan elements represent areligious folklore, transferable from one religious tradition to another'.⁴¹

In 2009 Chris Wickham could state in a textbook on early medieval Europe in general that the churchmen who denounced paganism in its Christian societies were facing 'the fact that traditional rituals of varying origins survived everywhere routinized into local Christian practice' so that 'preaching against such customs was unlikely to get rigorists very far, precisely because they were seen as Christian already'.⁴² Closer to the present time, in 2015, Steven Marrone could echo the point, again with reference to Europe in general: 'much that has been pointed to among the religious practices of the populace as evidence for a persistence of paganism or a pagan residue should instead be regarded as not substantially different from the broad spirituality promoted by the official

³⁹ *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford, 1991), 284-330.

⁴⁰ *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven, 1992), 283.

⁴¹ *Popular Religion in Anglo-Saxon England* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 140.

⁴² *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000* (London, 2009), 176-7.

church'.⁴³ Experts may still argue a lot over how far popular religion differed from that of the elite, but the concordance between them is clear: what zealous reforming prelates denounced as the practices of pagans was regarded by those who carried them on, with some reason, as the practices of Christians. The main claim of Dashu's conclusion had been answered long before she ever wrote it

The youngest generation of academic specialists has been even more resolute in expounding the idea of medieval Europeans as people embracing different shades and concepts of a universal Christianity. In his first book, in 2007, Carl Watkins attacked Carlo Ginzburg, Norman Cohn, Jean Delumeau and myself together, for speaking of 'pagan survivals' at all, calling the term completely unhelpful when it merely reflected the ruses of language employed by some medieval churchmen to condemn forms of Christianity of which they disapproved.⁴⁴ As said above, I am starting to think that to speak of aspects of medieval culture as 'pagan', might indeed be misleading and inadequate, but to call them 'Christian' suffers from the same faults. We do need a new language, which breaks us free of the old polemics.

So what of the new polemics, between revisionism and counter-revisionism in the world of Paganism and Goddess-veneration, as they relate to the work under review? As said, that work is explicitly aimed at people with no previous knowledge of the subject, and it also describes itself as a 'source-book', and indeed would work very well as one, in introducing newcomers to some of the most important and colourful texts, and figures, in medieval literature and history, and modern folklore. It also, however, very clearly aims to introduce those uninformed readers to a particular view of medieval history, pitted directly against that voiced by professional experts. It is not designed to enter into a dialogue with those experts, though it may be commended for avoiding any denunciations of them as people, and avoids completely the tactic – too common in earlier anti-revisionist Pagan and spiritual feminist writing – of picking out and demonizing one or two scholars. It is therefore designed for people with no knowledge of the subject, but whose existing beliefs will predispose them to welcome the message which it provides. So why am I engaging with it?

One reason is that there is much good stuff in it, with respect to the analysis of mythology and literature, as myth and creative writing, which even people who do not share the author's ideology should enjoy and find valuable. It also makes an argument about history, which, though I think wrong, and outdated and partial, is based on a great deal of work and offered up as direct reply to authors such as myself. However, I find the picture of history which it provides to be morally disturbing as well as factually misleading. It is designed to perpetuate and enhance a politics of hatred and fear, especially of Christians, and embodies in the process a language as well as an attitude left over from older and more bigoted times: Dashu's recurrent word for Christianity, 'priestcraft', was coined for use against Roman Catholicism, and then extended by some authors to attack other established churches. In an age in which such churches wielded significant coercive power, or even in later periods in which Christianity's cultural hegemony

⁴³ *A History of Science, Magic and Belief from Medieval to Early Modern Europe* (London, 2015),

⁴⁴ C. S. Watkins, *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2007), 76-106.

caused dangerous prejudice against non-Christians, such hostility might be justified. Now, however, most Western societies are passing into a post-Christian, largely secularized, age of religious tolerance, diversity and choice. The polemics of this book seem very ill suited to enabling citizens of such an age to live in peace and mutual regard for each other, despite differences of belief, which is a development on which the future security and stability of the West, if not the world, depends.

On the other hand, they fit well into a different development of the present day. All over the West, large numbers of people have greeted the prospect of a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-faith society with considerable alarm, and tended instead to form sub-cultures based on identity politics which are often defined in opposition to other groupings. Because of this, greater division and fragmentation, rather than a greater harmony based on mutual regard for different kinds of people, and different ideas, are hallmarks of our time. A parallel development has occurred within Paganism. A quarter of a century ago, operating in a United Kingdom in which the early twentieth-century origin myth of Pagans had already collapsed under the impact of accumulating research by historians, I was one of a number of people who set about attempting to provide an alternative history for (modern) Paganism, based on the most solid evidence which could be obtained and capable of recognising where that evidence ran out and speculation seemed likely to continue indefinitely. The expectation was that different people engaged in the project would compare and debate conclusions, and that as a result of this process a new and consensual picture of the origins and growth of Paganism would develop. This actually worked well in the British context, especially at the national level, but two unanticipated factors came into play: the sheer size and diversity, and divisions, of Pagan communities in other nations, conditioned by significantly different cultures, and the way in which these would all suddenly be brought into easy contact by the Internet. As a result, globally, a series of different Pagan sub-cultures have developed with rival concepts of history, as of other issues, marked by the same powerful and often adversarial identity politics that is characterizing the contemporary West in general. These groupings seem at present to be destined to be self-perpetuating, and Max Dashu's book is designed explicitly to ensure this process for her own one. If this is indeed to be the way of things, then perhaps, after all, the best way of ensuring harmony is not for the contrasting varieties of Paganism, and for academic and anti-academic writers on the pagan past, to exchange ideas and try to resolve their differences, but simply for them to leave each other alone in the future.